



What It Takes to Change Government: A Booz Allen Hamilton Leadership Study

The Obama Administration is calling upon federal agencies to implement meaningful changes that strengthen government operations and performance. To help agency leaders meet this challenge, Booz Allen Hamilton teamed with Harvard University Professor of Public Management Steven Kelman to identify the common methods—the best “leadership practices”—used by successful government executives to transform their agencies and achieve mission goals.

Fulfilling Government’s Promise

Government executives, whether political appointees or career staff, can find the federal bureaucracy confusing and resistant to change. Even when an agency’s mission is clear, accomplishing that mission can be difficult, especially when goals, leadership, and strategy are constantly changing. How do some leaders succeed in moving the bureaucracy forward and implementing change, while others are frustrated in their efforts?

To answer this question, Booz Allen’s Organization and Strategy consultants teamed with Steven Kelman, Weatherhead Professor of Public Management at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, in a rigorous examination of management approaches within government. We interviewed more than 250 federal leaders and their stakeholders from the past 16 years, reviewed agency budgets,

congressional testimony and other public documents, and examined 11 case studies from both Democratic and Republican administrations to understand the methods used by eight successful leaders to achieve their goals, and to learn whether different methods were used by three leaders who weren’t successful. We also looked at methods used by six “counterparts” – executives who led the same agency in a different administration, but who were not noted for having tried to make an ambitious change in strategy. Together with the unsuccessful leaders, these “counterparts” provide a larger control group against which to compare the methods of those who succeeded.

Patterns of Success: What It Takes to Change Government

We found that successful leaders and agencies use many of the same key managerial methods. Not surprisingly, these methods were rarely used by leaders who failed to implement desired changes, and by the counterparts who were less ambitious. Even more significant, we found that the common methods for success lie well within a leader’s control. That is, success is not happenstance. Government leaders have the means to implement new strategies and make those strategies “stick.” This is evidenced by the large number of similarities among prominent, successful leaders and agencies, and their contrast with leaders and agencies that failed or did not pursue change.

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Among the lessons learned for executing new strategies, we found that successful leaders commonly:

- **Pursue just two or three goals.** Successful leaders identified and pursued fewer goals than those who failed.
- **Get a running start by being proactive.** Successful leaders informed their strategy choices by gathering data and soliciting input, such as meeting with and listening to Congress and key stakeholders before confirmation, and before they were called to testify.
- **Use a strategy planning process—but without overdoing it.** Seventy-five percent of the successful agencies used a defined planning process, compared to just 11 percent of the control group. Not all of the successful agencies produced a written plan; however, their goals were effectively communicated by other means, and were consistently understood.
- **Manage within their organizations, not just at the 50,000-foot level.** Successful leaders focused half of their time on management efforts inside the agency. Leaders who didn't achieve their goals spent just one-quarter of their time internally.
- **Use performance measures.** Successful agencies used measures to communicate what their leaders wanted, delegate, and establish accountability. Few leaders in the control group used performance measures, and when they did, the measures focused on cost and production, but neglected quality and customer satisfaction.
- **Consider reorganizing, even if they don't want to.** Three-quarters of the successful leaders reorganized their agencies—specifically because they felt they had to—in order to achieve their goals. Only one-third of the unsuccessful or less ambitious leaders reorganized.

No single method, on its own, will ensure success. But together, as complementary pieces, these leadership methods provide the foundation for implementing transformational change in government.

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This research will help new leaders be ready for what's next.

Government is poised for extraordinary change. Not only is the Obama Administration reshaping and expanding the mission responsibilities of many agencies, but it is calling upon all agencies to improve government's transparency, accountability, and performance. The opportunities for long-lasting accomplishments and reform are vast. So, too, are the challenges.

Achieving genuine change does not seem to depend on luck or complex leadership traits. Rather, the methods used by successful leaders can be readily applied by government leaders at all levels, including Senior Executive Service personnel, career staff, congressional staff, and White House officials. Former Coast Guard Commandant James Loy asked, "Why did we succeed? Because of the thoroughness of the process we went through to listen to everyone and understand what they wanted."

Former IRS Commissioner Charles Rossotti concurred. "Getting people involved at all levels is a risk mitigation device, not just a motivational device... It provides a firmer basis for strategic planning by exposing you to a lot of details you may not be aware of."

A planning process that includes listening and gathering information before making strategy decisions is perhaps the most potent leadership method, and is a technique that will help government executives implement changes to improve citizen services, strengthen operational performance and achieve their agency's mission goals.

Ready to Help You

To learn more about the know-how behind this project's success, and how it can help your team be ready for what's next, visit:

- www.boozallen.com/what-it-takes-to-change-government/
- <http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP09-009>.